

CURVEBALL

The Year I Lost My Grip

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Summary: After an injury ends former star pitcher Peter Friedman's athletic dreams, he concentrates on photography which leads him to a girlfriend, new fame as a high school sports photographer, and a deeper relationship with the beloved grandfather who, when he realizes he is becoming senile, gives Pete all of his professional camera gear.

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when i was little . . .

The very first thing I can remember is this: I am really, really mad at my mom for some reason. I'm sitting in the middle of the living room, arms crossed, pouting. At this stage, I am a world-champion pouter. There's an old guy — my grandfather — kneeling in front of me, trying to cheer me up.

“Come on!” he says. “If you give me just one smile, I promise I'll . . . umm . . . I'll give you a mint!”

I remember thinking, *A mint? He thinks I'm going to give in completely, just to get a mint?*

When I don't smile, or even uncross my stubby little arms, he ups the offer. “OK, what if I buy you an ice cream?”

Ice cream, huh? Now he's talking my language. But I'm still mad, so I shake my head and concentrate on pouting harder.

Grampa leans in really close and whispers, “Peter, what if I give you a tour of my studio?”

This is too good to be true. Grampa is a professional photographer, and he never lets me go into his studio. Whenever I ask, he tells me, “You don’t want to go in there. You wouldn’t be allowed to touch anything. Besides, it smells like chemicals from the darkroom.” But that only makes me want to go in there even more. It’s Grampa’s Special Place, where he goes to Make Art. And Money!

Still, even at age three or whatever, I know how to play it cool. “I don’t know,” I say. “Can I go to your studio *and* get a mint? That way, I won’t even smell the menicals. . . .”

Grampa looks puzzled for a second, then laughs. “Menicals? You mean chemicals! All right, big man. Let’s see that smile!”

I smile, big-time. Grampa takes my hands, walks outside with me, and puts me in his Big Truck, an SUV with a big yellow picture of a mountain on the side. In classy-looking letters I can’t read yet, the words GOLDBERG PHOTO are printed right under

the back window. We drive across town to the studio.

I have no idea how long we spent in the studio that day, partly because I've spent so much time there since then that I can't be one hundred percent sure which memories are which. But I remember being in awe. Huge blowups of Grampa's photos are everywhere. There is a whole wall of brides: My grampa gets to look at a *lot* of beautiful ladies. Another wall is just for landscapes: The sun rising over the Alps. A pond with mist hanging over it. A desert that seems to stretch into infinity. My grampa gets to go to all of these places! The third wall is the best of all, even though it's kind of scary, too. Everywhere I look, there's something shocking: Soldiers, with real guns! An angry tiger, looking right at me! A cobra, raised up to strike! My grampa has looked at all of these dangerous things, with nothing but a camera between him and them.

Clearly, Grampa is the coolest person in the world. "Well," he says, after I have gaped at every photo, "these pictures are my life's work. Do you like them?"

I nod really hard. Grampa grins and asks, “Do you have any questions?”

I look at the pictures some more. I have been wondering something the whole time, trying to imagine my grampa looking through his camera lens and pushing the button to take each of the pictures, but I am having trouble expressing it as a question. Fortunately, Grampa is amazing at waiting. Eventually, I blurt, “How do you *know*?”

“How do I know what?”

“How do you know the picture is going to be so good? Right when you push the button. How do you know?”

He laughs again. “Well, first of all, sometimes I take bad pictures, too. Only I don’t blow them up and frame them for everybody to see. But . . . when a shot is going to be really, really good, you can just tell.”

“How? *How*, Grampa?” I want to know, because I want to take pictures exactly like these someday.

Grampa looks thoughtful for a while, not saying anything. Then he bends his knees so we are eye to eye, puts his hand on my shoulder, and says, “I don’t know, pal. Sometimes, you just know it when you see it.”

Snap I

The first picture is a wide-angle shot, taken through the chain-link fence of the backstop behind home plate. There's a boy standing on a pitcher's mound in full uniform: green and gold. His cap is pulled low over his eyes, and his unruly black hair sticks out below the brim in all directions. He leans in toward home plate, his throwing arm dangling loose at his side. He must be looking in to get his sign from the catcher.

The second picture is zoomed in a lot closer, a full-body shot of the pitcher alone. He's standing sideways now, but his head is turned toward the plate, and you can tell he is about a thousandth of a second away from going into his windup. Maybe because he's fully upright, or maybe because of the tighter shot, you can just make out his eyes in this one. The look on his face is intense, like he is trying to stare a laser line right through the batter, the catcher, the umpire, even the photographer. The pitcher might be concentrating really, really hard. Or he might be in a whole lot of pain. It's hard to tell.

The next several photos are taken all in a row, click, click-click. Each is zoomed in more tightly than the one before it. The pitcher is in his windup, one arm cocked behind his head, his glove hand swinging down, across his body, toward the catcher. Then the throwing arm is whipping its way forward in stop-time as his compact body is launched forward by the thrust of his back leg against the pitching rubber. There's a shot that freezes the action just as the ball leaves the pitcher's hand. His arm is coming straight down, and his entire body is tumbling forward. If you look past all of the moving limbs, you might be able to tell that something has gone wrong. The pitcher's face is now stretched in a grimace of agony.

In the next shot, the pitcher has fallen halfway out of the frame so that you can only see his head, his shoulders, a blur of infield, outfield, the blue sky. The photographer adjusts in a split second, swinging the camera downward just enough to center his subject in the frame one more time. Now the pitcher has tumbled to his knees, and his glove hand is pressed against the elbow of his throwing arm. Click. There's another photo, blurred as though the photographer is moving when the

shutter opens: the boy falling forward. You can tell his face is going to hit the dirt at the foot of the pitcher's mound. You can tell it's probably going to hurt.

The photographer is my grandfather.

The pitcher is me.

1. click

If I had known it was going to be the last baseball game I'd ever play, I would have asked my mom to bring the video camera or something. But you never know that kind of stuff in advance. All you can do is play every game like it's your final shot at the World Series, and hope that for you, it isn't.

It was the summer after eighth grade. I was the relief pitcher, trying to close out a 2–1 victory in the league championship. All I needed to do was get through one inning without giving up a run. My best friend, AJ Moore, was catching, as usual. We were the two best pitchers on the team. Actually, we were the two best pitchers in the league, and the two best catchers — which meant that when I pitched, he caught, and vice versa. It was a unique situation, having two best friends pitching to each other all the time. I mean, really unique, the kind of

unique that gets written up in the newspaper. The kind of unique that makes the town's high school baseball coach come out to scout our post-season games.

The kind of unique that girls notice. AJ and I were the golden boys of eighth grade. He actually was a golden boy: almost six feet tall, with blond hair, bright blue eyes, and a relaxed smoothness that came from knowing everyone loved him. I wasn't literally quite as golden. As in, I was a five-foot-three Jewish kid with black hair, pale skin, and glasses. AJ was a power-throwing righty; I was a sneaky, deceptive lefty. AJ was a natural catcher. I had to work my butt off behind the plate, which was made harder by the fact that I was the only lefty catcher at our level in the whole league. Generally, coaches frown on left-handed kids becoming catchers, so you have to be really, really good at it if you ever want to get any playing time at the position.

Off the field, the differences between us were just as obvious. Where AJ was smooth, I was prickly. He smiled, I brooded. He could laugh things off, but I

took everything too seriously. He liked winning, but I lived to win. When we lost, he would scowl at the time but get over it when he left the field. I would go home and punch my pillow for half an hour. Fortunately, I had two things going for me that helped my social standing: I was an athlete, and I was AJ's friend.

Anyway, the way things were supposed to go in this game was that I would blow away the first three batters I faced, in order, and we would win the Lehigh Valley Knee-High Baseball League title for the second year in a row. The high school coach would be so impressed with AJ and me that he would make us starting pitchers on the JV team when we got to ninth grade. AJ had pitched six great innings to get us this far, and now I was on the mound. All I had to do was the usual.

I tried to ignore the stabbing ache in my left elbow. That pain, which had been with me all season, was my biggest secret. Nobody knew about it, and I mean nobody. Not AJ, not any of my coaches, and certainly not my parents. If the coaches knew, they

might not let me pitch. And if my parents found out, forget about it. They would absolutely freak. Mom would rush onto the field and be all like “My baby! MY BA-A-A-BY!” Then I would basically have to move to Canada.

Ever since AJ’s massive growth spurt in seventh grade had left me a whole head shorter than he was, I had been overthrowing the ball. I knew it, but that was the only way I was going to compete, keep getting batters out, and — hopefully — make the high school team. So I would throw fastball after fastball until it felt like my elbow was getting mashed up in a meat grinder, and then I’d mix in a couple of curveballs, which felt even worse. On the other hand, at this point I figured I was only nine good pitches — three strikeouts — away from a whole winter of rest and recovery.

Nine. Freaking. Good. Pitches.

The first batter was easy. AJ had gotten him out twice with nothing but fastballs, so I figured he would jump all over my first pitch. AJ signaled for a changeup, and the guy pounded the ball straight into

the ground. It rolled about three feet in front of the plate. AJ pounced on the ball and whipped it to first. One away.

Batter Number Two was no problem. AJ hadn't shown him anything but fastballs, either. I had a feeling he'd lay off the first pitch after what I had just done to the leadoff dude, and I was right. I threw a change right in there for a strike. I knew he'd jump on the second pitch. AJ signaled for another change, down in the dirt. I missed my spot completely and threw it high. Luckily, the kid swatted at the ball, and hit a soft pop-up to third base.

The third batter stepped into the box: their first baseman. A hard-hitting lefty who had already hit two doubles off of AJ. I figured that was all right. Lefties have trouble hitting left-handed pitching. All I had to do was get one fastball by him. Then I could throw a curveball right at his head. He would flinch, but the ball would break down and away from him, and hopefully end up on the inside corner of the strike zone. Follow that with an inside changeup, and I'd be done.

AJ put down one finger in the classic catcher's sign for a fastball. I took a deep breath, wound up, and hurled the ball as hard as I could. Something clicked in my elbow joint, like there were two pennies snapping past each other in there. It took every ounce of determination I had not to grab my arm and whimper. The batter hit a screaming liner down the left-field line, maybe three feet foul.

Wow, this kid had fast hands.

AJ put down one finger again. I shook my head: There was no way I was going to get another fastball past this kid. Even if my arm didn't explode in the process, I just couldn't throw hard enough. AJ trotted out to me, put an arm around my shoulder, and muttered, "What's going on, Peter?"

"Nothing. I just don't think I can get another fastball by him."

"Dude, I'm telling you, this kid killed my off-speed stuff. You have to bring the fastball."

"AJ, I can't."

"What do you mean, you can't?"

I just looked at him. "You're hurt, aren't you?" he asked.

I looked away. “It’s fine,” I said. From the corner of my eye, I saw the home-plate umpire stand up straight and start heading toward the mound. It looked like meeting time was over.

AJ sighed. “All right, Pete. Curveball in?”

I stared right into AJ’s eyes, trying to thank him without thanking him. “Curveball in.” AJ trotted back behind home plate, the ump got settled into his crouch and pointed his finger at me — the “Play ball!” signal — and I toed the pitching rubber. It was time for business.

The curveball felt very nearly as bad as the fastball had, with that same horrible bony click in my elbow. But the batter flinched and whiffed. Then I threw the inside changeup exactly where I wanted it.

Unfortunately, the guy didn’t swing. One ball, two strikes. And I didn’t have anything left to throw at him. AJ put down the changeup sign again, but I knew the kid wouldn’t swing at a change unless I put it right down the middle of the plate. I shook my head. AJ put down the fastball sign — what choice did he have? I shrugged him off yet again. He looked at me. I looked at him. Clearly, we had

both done the math. There was nothing left but the curve.

AJ jogged out to me again. This time, our coach came out of the dugout. Coach got to me first. “Whaddaya doin’, Petey? Give ’im the fastball. Let’s win this thing and go get some pizza.” AJ started to say something, but Coach silenced him with a glare. I nodded. Sometimes in life, even when you know it’s going to hurt, you just have to throw that fastball.

While Coach walked back to the bench, and AJ got himself set up again, I took a little stroll to the back of the mound. I bent over, picked up the rosin bag, and tossed it up and down a couple of times. My knees were a little shaky. My arm throbbed worse than it had ever throbbed before. I took a deep breath, dropped the bag, stepped up to the rubber, and tried to tell myself positive thoughts: *It’s only one more pitch. How bad can it be? You can be a hero or you can be a wuss. And Peter Friedman is no wuss.*

The batter stepped into the box. The ump pointed to me. AJ got his glove down around the outside corner of the strike zone. I went into my windup. As

my hand turned behind my left ear, I felt another of those strange penny clicks. I gasped, closed my eyes for a split second, and whipped my arm forward as hard as I could. Maybe a thousandth of a second after the ball left my hand, my elbow locked up completely. I fell to my knees in front of the mound. As bad as the pain had been before, this was a whole new experience. I saw lights flashing in front of my eyes. *Don't cry*, I told myself. *You are on the field in the middle of a game. You. Will. Not. Cry.*

I tried to look around and figure out what had happened with the pitch, but things were starting to get blurry. Also, I noticed I wasn't on my knees anymore. Somehow, I had fallen all the way forward, and there was cool dirt against my right cheek. I had the feeling people were talking. They might even have been shouting. But it all kind of sounded like underwater music or something. Then hands were on me.

AJ said, "Pete! Pete! Can you hear me?"

I was afraid that if I talked, my voice would have that crying sound to it, and everyone would know I

was weak. But I was even more afraid someone might try to move my elbow. “It’s my arm. Don’t move my arm!”

Then Coach was kneeling next to me. I forgot about the arm for a second. “Did I get him?” I muttered. “Is it over?”

“You did great, Pete. It’s all over. Now I’m just going to try and sit you up, all right? AJ, support his head. Ready? One, two, three . . .”

They rolled me up and over, and the whole world spun like I had just gotten off the mother of all roller coasters. Now I was on my butt in the grass in front of the mound, facing first base. The batter was standing on the bag. I whirled back around to face Coach. “Wait, I thought I got him,” I said. Now my voice was starting to tear up. I saw Coach gesturing to our dugout, and noticed that the assistant coach was on his way up the steps with a first-aid kit. My parents and grandfather were all right there, too, leaning against the chain-link fence, looking painfully scared.

Coach said, “Pete, I’m going to move your arm around a little bit, OK? Just tell me where it hurts.”

I wanted to shout, “No-o-o-o-o!!” but I knew I was about a half second away from bawling my eyes out, and now the entire team was standing in a semi-circle around me. Coach took my hand and rolled my wrist maybe half an inch.

I heard a strangled, high-pitched scream. I wondered where it was coming from for an instant, until I realized my mouth was wide open. Everything started going black around the edges, and I was slumping over again. The last thing I remember seeing was that hitter, standing on first base like he owned it.